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THE JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

PSYCHOLOGY AND SCIENTIFIC METHODS

WHY DO PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEMS PERSIST?

IT is scarcely a decade since the controversy over the official doctrines of objective idealism was at its height. The chief point at issue was the question of philosophic method, or, as it was usually stated, the nature of truth. For objective idealism the chief reliance for the discovery of truth was, and still remains, the dialectic method; whereas the pragmatic attack was based upon the proposition that truth, in the language of James, must have a "cash value" in terms of concrete experience. While the debate undoubtedly did much to clarify the issue, it naturally did not result in a decisive victory for either party, but finally died away from sheer exhaustion. A decent respect for the feelings of one's fellow men would perhaps suggest that the subject of the dispute be left to rest in peace. The recent appearance, however, in a new edition, of Miss Calkins's well-known text-book, *The Persistent Problems of Philosophy*, is a strong temptation to raise once more the previous issue, for the reason that the book is an unusually able and skilful embodiment of the method against which the pragmatic movement is a reaction and a protest.

Even to the casual eye Miss Calkins's book presents an appearance of finality and logical symmetry which the "toughminded" reader has learned to recognize and distrust. The point of departure is the doubt of Descartes with its implication that there exists a self as the possessor of the doubt. Given the fact of selfhood, the argument then proceeds to develop the implications of this fact, through contact with historical systems, until the reader finally lays his burdens down in the shelter of an absolute that guarantees to his fundamental values immunity from the vicissitudes of time and change. In this triumphant progress divergent doctrines acquire the status of partial expressions or "moments" in idealistic truth, and the conclusion emerges that "with Hegel's system all logically possible ground-forms of metaphysical doctrine have been put forward, so that a

¹ *The Persistent Problems of Philosophy*. Mary Whiton Calkins. New York: The Macmillan Company.

system, however spontaneous its inception, must fall within the grooves already worn" (p. 397).

The logical skill with which this result is obtained may be cordially conceded. For the critic the important question is naturally just how it was done. It is contended, in effect, that the self is the only fact that is known or can be known, and the threat of solipsism is obviated by the identification of the self with an inclusive self, which makes it possible to recognize the existence of further reality without going beyond the limits of selfhood. The existence of other selves, therefore, offers no insuperable difficulty. "There is a certain sense in which the other self is ultimately *not* another. For if all finite selves are expressions of the infinite self, then in one way each is what the other is, so that direct knowledge of one by the other is conceivable" (p. 146). But what justification is furnished for the contention that "the immediateness of self-consciousness is the starting-point of all philosophy, the guarantee of all truth" (p. 409) ?

In the case of Descartes the grounds for this conclusion are familiar. Having failed to divest himself of the traditional doctrine regarding a substantial soul, Descartes naturally accepted the fact of error and the relativity of sense-perception as conclusive evidence that the soul and its experiences are existentially cut off from all other reality, which, therefore, could be reached only by processes of ratiocination. The existence of the self, accordingly, is the only fact that is directly accessible, and so it follows that "the immediateness of self-consciousness is the starting-point of philosophy." This conclusion is adopted by Miss Calkins as a foundation-stone for an idealistic superstructure. It appears presently that, since immediate knowledge is limited to the self, all reality must be construed in terms of selfhood. As the argument progresses, however, it seems finally to abolish its own premises. "In being conscious of myself, I am directly conscious of myself as limited; and to be conscious of myself as limited is to be conscious of that which limits me, as being, in a certain sense, beyond myself" (p. 410). Direct consciousness, we now find, never was limited to the self and its "states," since our knowledge of objects is equally direct. This result would undoubtedly prove disastrous to the starting-point, if it had not already been shown that only self is real. The beyond is a beyond only "in a certain sense"; in a deeper sense it is identical with the self that is limited by it. It follows, therefore, that "in being directly conscious of other-than-myself I am conscious of other self or selves. Thus my consciousness of friend, of master, or of God, is in its nature a direct consciousness" (p. 410). That is, Descartes's naïve assumptions are first exploited to the limit, and then, when the end is attained, they

are ungratefully repudiated as errors of uncritical thinking. *Undank ist der Welt Lohn.* This form of procedure is on a par with that of certain subjectivists, who argue that, as Santayana puts it, because all our sense-experiences are conditioned by the body, therefore we have no body. Or, to quote a more illustrious precedent, the procedure is analogous to that of Kant, who adopted Hume's conception of sense-experience as a conglomeration of independent sense-units, in order to justify his own doctrine that knowledge involves categories having *a priori* validity, the categories being then used to deny and set aside the notion of isolated sense-units as an egregious fiction.

It is possible, no doubt, to object that the belief in the self, according to Miss Calkins, does not depend upon Descartes's argument at all, but rests upon "direct introspection," which reveals the fact "that consciousness is not a mere idea or series of ideas, but that it is the unique subject of ideas" (p. 407). This objection, however, does not take us very far. That we meet with the fact of selfhood in the course of experience is indubitably true, though it is not altogether clear why this should be called a fact of "introspection." But in view of the admission that our knowledge of things other than self is equally direct, it would seem that the knowledge of objects is on essentially the same footing as our knowledge of self, even though the term introspection appears less appropriate as a label in the former case. It is true that the objects thus directly known may prove in the end not to be anything other than the self, after all. This, however, is a matter to be determined by further investigation. It is not proved by first assuming that the knowledge of the self has a superior directness or immediacy and then arguing that objects must be fundamentally or ultimately identical with the self on the ground that our knowledge of them has precisely the same kind of immediacy. Or, to put the matter differently, to assert that we have direct knowledge of things which are other than self and then to identify the self with everything in the universe in order to make this assertion square with Descartes's erroneous supposition that direct knowledge is limited to the self and its "states," is bound to suggest a certain inconclusiveness, even when the contention is backed up by an appeal to introspection. My point just now is not primarily that the system advocated by Miss Calkins is untrue, but simply that it is constructed out of whole cloth. It is neither a cogent development of Descartes's doctrines nor is it in any way supported by the facts of introspection. The treatment of Descartes and his successors is essentially in the nature of unintentional *camouflage* for the concealment of a major operation, the objective of which has been selected in advance. To cite our previous illustration, it might be granted as

an antecedent possibility that Kant's doctrine of *a priori* knowledge may prove to be true, but this antecedent possibility stands on its own bottom and gains no support whatever from the manipulation of a bystander, whose business it is to observe and know, but who is not permitted to take a hand in what is going on. The presence of the isolated sense-data borrowed from Hume.

Approaching the matter from a different angle, we may say that the problem of knowledge with which Miss Calkins deals is essentially an artificial problem. Here again Descartes furnishes us our clue. When Descartes transformed the self into a "thinking thing" existentially detached from objects, the problem of knowledge became the problem how an idea "in the mind" could know an external reality from which it was separated by an impassable gulf. What is of especial importance in this connection is just this peculiar turn given to the problem of knowledge or consciousness. The latter is lifted bodily from the stream of events and reduced to the status of spectator must make no difference whatever to the object. It is true that Descartes's undertaking was a complete failure as regards knowledge of external objects. The isolation of consciousness proved to be so complete that not even a "cognitive relation" with objects could be established. With regard to the self, however, which happily dwells on the hither side of the chasm, the case is presumed to be different. Here, as Miss Calkins agrees, knowing is an indubitable fact, for the deliverance of introspection is reasonably clear. Here we meet with no obstacle to an immediate awareness of the self, for "subject and object coalesce in the experience of my consciousness of myself as knowing and thinking, feeling and willing" (p. 359). But in this immediate awareness it is not difficult to trace the influence of the original dualism. Knowledge of the self is supposed to be possible, not because reference in this case is unimpeded by the ugly ditch of dualism, but because reference has been eliminated altogether, since "subject and object coalesce." In this immediate awareness we seem to achieve the dualistic ideal of knowledge, which is the detached onlooking of the bystander. It is evident, however, that this ideal loses its authority when dualism is discarded. It is hardly justifiable to abandon dualism and still assume without argument that all knowledge must be at bottom of this kind, incompatible appearances to the contrary notwithstanding. Yet the whole idealistic elaboration of selfhood, in Miss Calkins's philosophy, may be traced back to the fact that the dualistic notion of consciousness is retained after the reasons for it have been rejected. The purpose of her undertaking is to draw out the implications to which we are committed if we take for granted that all knowledge is of this sort,

but whether we ought to take this for granted is not considered at all. The dialectical development, accordingly, is just an interesting exhibition of what can be done by a determined person with a given set of concepts. A procedure which assumes beforehand that reference *must* be reducible to immediacy and which has recourse to an absolute mind in order to prove that knowledge is "essentially the immediate presence of spirit to spirit" (p. 147) can hardly claim to be empirical, either in starting-point or in method, and is consequently unable to give any reasonable assurance that the subject-matter of the discussion has anything to do with actual existence. And this lack of assurance is all the more painful when we discover that the reference to the absolute is more of an appeal to faith than to the understanding. How the infinite produces ideas in the finite mind, or how the finite knows either the infinite or other human selves is a problem, so we are told, for which "a completely satisfactory solution, it must be admitted, philosophy has never yet found" (p. 273).

Whether a satisfactory solution of this problem is inherently possible is a matter of minor importance for present purposes, although it may safely be added that this possibility is much open to doubt. As Professor Bush says, "A problem generated by mythical conditions may contain a perfectly logical sequence, but it is just as mythical as the conditions that generate it. The important thing to find out in the case of any suspected problem is what raises the question."² As I have tried to show, the problem of knowledge which Miss Calkins tries to solve has its origin in the dualistic assumptions underlying the speculations of Descartes. The problem itself is artificial, and what is needed is not a solution of the problem, but a reconsideration of the meaning of the Cartesian doubt. If we approach the subject without idealistic preconceptions as to what knowledge or consciousness must be like, the doubt seems to resolve itself into the doubt whether a given fact *A* may be taken as a sign of some further fact *B*, *i. e.*, it concerns itself with the relation of "leading" or "pointing" by the present fact to some future fact. The doubt means that the pointing is uncertain, that the fact pointed to is for the time being merely a suggested object, which, as suggested, stands in a certain contrast with the present fact. It is this contrast which, as I venture to think, gives us the key to the distinction between self and object. Moreover, the resolution of such a doubt plainly calls for the type of inquiry that is characteristic of science and common sense, rather than purely deductive inference; and the tests appropriate to such inquiry would seem to be of a pragmatic kind. How-

² "The Emancipation of Intelligence," this JOURNAL, Vol. VIII., p. 176.

ever, my immediate concern is not so much to argue for the correctness of this interpretation as to insist that the attempt to solve problems without reference to the conditions in which they arise makes philosophy a repository for "persistent problems" that ought to be recognized as dead and entitled to decent burial. Such attempts lead inevitably to a confusion of an "unearthly ballet of bloodless categories" with an inquiry into matters of existence.

That Descartes's doubt, taken as a reaction against the claims of authority, was of enormous significance, is not, of course, in dispute. A similar significance attaches to Locke's insistence that direct experience must be the touchstone of theory, and to the idealistic formulation of the doctrine that man is the measure of things. These doctrines were significant precisely because they provided an outlook upon life that gave promise of a more effective control of experience. It is when theory lapses from its proper function of giving us a better leverage on the facts of experience and becomes a means of perpetuating artificial problems that we have a close parallel to the procedure of the hidebound lawyer whose vision is limited to the letter of the law. It is this conservatism which has converted Locke's doctrine of "simple ideas," so useful and so true within its own proper limits, into a millstone on the neck of psychology even to the present day, and which has placed the doctrine of the self, as a purely dialectical development, outside the pale of scientific method and reduced it to the level of mental acrobatics. Instead of evaluating theory in terms of specific service, we rebuild our world with the aid of unverifiable and unintelligible fact, in token of our subservience to the theory. In psychology the quest of knowledge has degenerated into a still-hunt for mythical sensations, and in philosophy it has lost itself in a half-mystical adoration of a reality which promises to relieve us from further responsibility for the tangled web of "appearances." The usefulness of theory in a workaday world is superseded by the idle ceremonial of the temple. "As modern life becomes freer and more diversified, these conservative symbols become less and less adequate to the substance of experience. What can be more naïve than to substitute the dialectic of a symbol for the direct study of conditions, if what one is after is a knowledge of actual conditions? It is certainly to be regretted if professional philosophy has assumed a character that renders it unavailable as a method of intelligence. That does not mean that guiding philosophy has ceased to exist, but only that it has changed its name and fled into other departments of our universities, where chairs are not maintained for either saving the supernatural or threshing the husks of idealism."³

³ Bush, *ibid.*, p. 177.

The reproach that philosophy is "abstract," that it dreams pipe-dreams and spins cobwebs in a world where there is so much real work to be done, is too well founded to be passed over lightly. When we "substitute the dialectic of a symbol for the direct study of conditions" philosophy inevitably tends to become the sort of thing that its opponents say it is. We need to reconsider the purpose that an introduction to philosophy is to accomplish, to return once more to a direct study of conditions. Why is it that men philosophize? To say that speculation has its origin in curiosity or wonder is not to say very much. Scientific investigation may, with equal justification, be ascribed to wonder, and it is not apparent why all legitimate inquiry should not be confined to the domains of the several sciences. It is true that the results of scientific inquiry seem to show internal discrepancies when we attempt to correlate what has been achieved in different fields, and also that they sometimes fail to tally very well with what is accepted as fact in the affairs of every-day life. The sensations and images into which psychology resolves experience seem to leave no room for physics; the identification by the physicist of matter with the "primary qualities" makes knowing an inscrutable mystery; and the tendency in physiology to regard consciousness as a product or concomitant of cerebral processes conflicts with the reality of freedom and personal responsibility. Yet the recognition of such discrepancies is not equivalent to a recognition of the claim of philosophy to an honorable place in the curriculum. Since the discrepancies are evidence that there is error somewhere in what has been taken as fact, it may be argued that the remedy must be furnished by the scientist himself. He alone is competent to pass upon the evidence within his chosen field, and the attempts of philosophy to sit in judgment on the results of scientific inquiry must be set aside as unwarranted impertinence.

This contention undoubtedly has a certain plausibility, but it appears less cogent when we discover the reason why the results of science and the observations of common sense fail to unite spontaneously into a harmonious body or system of fact. The scientist is not only an expert in a certain subject, but he is also a human being, and as such he brings to his work a highly complex background of traditional beliefs and assumptions. As the heir of all the ages he is in possession of a culture that has its roots in the animisms, the theologies, and the common-sense hypostatizations of bygone generations. In so far as this background is affected by his researches it is subject to modification; but for the rest it is likely to remain in general about what it was. The traditional doctrine, for example, of the soul or of mental states is not necessarily a serious obstacle to the physicist or the physiologist within the limits of their respective

sciences, and even the psychologist is able to get along, after a fashion, on this basis. In a parallel way the common-sense notion that weight is a property or attribute which inheres in each object by itself is entirely compatible with the making of accurate observations regarding the use of levers or the behavior of objects such as ships, avalanches, and falling timbers. It is when the observations are extended to include non-terrestrial objects that this concept of weight is found to be inadequate. When the need of a revision arises it is not primarily the facts attested by observation and experiment, but the uncriticized assumptions that constitute the source of the trouble. If physics or physiology is found to conflict with the facts of knowledge or of ethics, the difficulty has its origin in notions regarding the nature of intelligence, and a difficulty of this sort does not call for more refined methods in our physics and physiology, but demands a correction of these notions with reference to the matter in hand. The problem is not a problem in physics or in physiology, nor are the methods of these sciences appropriate to the solution of the problem. What is needed is, in the first instance, an emancipation from the weight of tradition, habit, and authority, and to secure this emancipation is the proper function of philosophy. The reason why men philosophize is that the escape from this tyranny of the past can be obtained in no other way.

How completely our habitual reactions and interpretations may fail to meet the needs of new situations is sufficiently evident from the current confusions regarding democracy, free speech, patriotism, loyalty, duty, and the like. If it is uncertainties of this sort that reveal to us the insufficiencies of our intellectual heritage, do they not at the same time furnish us with a measure for the proposed reconstruction? The value or truth of a philosophic system is not to be estimated by reference to a standard of "absolute reason," but by the success with which it enables us to meet emergencies as they arise. The pretension of finality is an indication that philosophy has misunderstood its mission to liberate intelligence from the domination of naïve assumption through a criticism of knowledge and to provide something to live by in the form of a generalized theory of adjustment. The "persistent problems of philosophy" center on the nature of intelligence, truth, and goodness because these need to be redefined from generation to generation. An introduction to philosophy that is true to its obligations will take as its point of departure the actual difficulties of the present and will attempt to show both the origin of the difficulties and a means of reconciliation. If we let go of the present situation as our point of orientation or standard of reference, there is no substitute save the criterion of formal consistency. Instead of correcting erroneous

assumptions in the light of the present situation, we then convert them into fundamental truths and build around them a new heaven and a new earth to justify our act. The gratuitous premises inevitably lead to a non-empirical and unverifiable conclusion, the chief merit of which is not that it furnishes a more unified and suggestive outlook upon new situations as they occur, but rather that it has been derived by a strictly logical process of inference.

When a system of philosophy loses contact with life and becomes absorbed in a set of purely professional problems there is ground for the suspicion that it no longer serves the needs which called it into being. To keep an eye on the social situation in which the problem has its origin, to bear in mind that it is the function of philosophy to reorganize the conflicting interests of life, is indispensable if philosophy is to protect itself against the danger of losing itself in problems that are the product of historic accident. The need of reconstruction from which philosophy is born is precisely the need to escape from the obsessions of the past and thus to liberate intelligence for the tasks of the present. Philosophic reflection means an unlimbering of our intellectual resources, an emancipation from the effects of mental habits and predispositions, in so far as these constitute obstructions to a more effective mode of dealing with present times and circumstances; and the "persistent problems of philosophy," accordingly, demand a solution, not in terms of "absolute reason," but rather in terms of the successive situations which give to each solution whatever value it may possess as a contribution to human progress.

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SOCIETIES

THE SEVENTEENTH ANNUAL MEETING OF THE AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL ASSOCIATION

THE PHILOSOPHERS IN WARTIME

PHILOSOPHERS, as somewhat amorphously defined by the popular imagination, are profound irrelevant people totally and absurdly unaffected by considerations of time and space. Philosophers have themselves contributed to this untutored estimate by persuading themselves that their interests were timeless and their conclusions eternal. Even the disciplined professional, therefore, might have anticipated that the first war meeting of the American